

PART ONE

Intertextual Palestine

In reality, we cannot comment using conventional methods on that which is unconventional. . . . [C]ategorization here is unimportant. What is important, I think, is its transcendence of categorization, so to speak.

—IBRAHIM NASRALLAH

[Intertextuality] penetrates the walls of time and place, leaps to the past, plays with the present, foresees the future.

—IHSAN AL-DIK

Before you write Palestine in blood, learn to write it with ink.

—MOIN BISEISU

STARTING WITH SOME OF THE BASICS—or so they might seem—this section lays out answers to the most ordinary questions asked about an unfamiliar story. As this project tries to narrate an unfamiliar Palestine, we might begin with “Where is it?” and “When is it?” (the “who” comes a bit later). The answers the chapters in this part draw out and redefine the terms on which these foundational questions are asked. Drawing from intertextuality theory, Arabic grammar, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope, analysis sets out the parameters for the “where” and “when” of Nasrallah’s Palestine but also, fundamentally, the “how.” These foundational paradigms of imagining ultimately reorder (“un-order,” “dis-order”?) the tenets of space-time that the national novel is assumed to write. This begins with a telling of the story of the Palestine Comedies (*al-Malhāt al-filasṭīniyya*) and the Balconies (*Shurafāt*) as a single literary project, for this logic—what brings the series together, what holds them as a unified body of material—is also what binds the vision of Palestine that they co-create. It is the mechanisms of linkage that become the where and the when.

Ultimately the works of the Palestine Project develop their own vocabulary for a description of the nation. Since that vocabulary has not yet been set out, analysis begins by relying on existing theory, in particular, the work of Gerard Genette on what he calls the science of “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.”¹ From citation (when a character asks, “To be or not to be?,” invoking Hamlet) to parody, or in Genette’s words, “types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres,”² Genette set out a vast accounting of the many ways and means of relationship between one text and another in his three encyclopedic volumes, *Palimpsests*, *Paratexts*, and *Architexts*. Genette’s precise

language is harnessed here to begin describing the relationships between place and time in Nasrallah's Palestine. This is not a new approach to reading Palestinian literature.³ As the literary critic Ihsan al-Dik at an-Najah University in Nablus puts it, in Palestinian literature "intertextuality is unescapable."⁴

For decades the techniques of intertextuality have been recognized as something that knits the spaces and times of Palestine together. For al-Dik, intertextual devices allow authors access to their own literary archive of "religion and *adab* and myth and history."⁵ Similarly, Abd al-Hadi Abu Samra at Al-Azhar University in Gaza has shown that intertextuality "makes present *turāth* [cultural heritage] by calling on missing texts and tying them in" to an imagined present.⁶ Al-Dik reads the inter-referencing of texts not only as a way of preserving the Palestinian past in literary form, but as a chance to arrange and create relationships between the parts of the archive and "see what is not seen."⁷ The interweaving of references, in al-Dik's words, "penetrates the walls of time and place, leaps to the past, plays with the present, foresees the future."⁸ Ibrahim Nimr Mousa at Birzeit University, reading Tawfiq Zayyad, extends this further, writing that "intertextuality overlooks the borders of time and space."⁹ The use of intertextuality theory to read Nasrallah's series simply takes existing thinking to its logical limit, or rather, reads how Nasrallah's Palestine Project mobilizes intertextuality to create a richly articulated vision of Palestinian time and space.

Intertextuality can make fiction boundless, drawing connections across and between what seemed before as disparate places, times, and epistemologies. It thus has very clear possible usages for the imagination of Palestine, which exists in the hearts and homes and hills of a great many different geopolitical locations. Though one student at the Islamic University in Gaza lamented the "difficulty in determining the scope and complexity of intertextuality, and the multiplicity of methods for its application in contemporary studies,"¹⁰ for this project the diversity is a boon, furnishing analysis with a vast array of ideas and theories. Here it includes the work of structuralists (Mikhail Bakhtin, Gerard Genette) and semioticians (Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes) but also the tradition of *adab* (literature, or more accurately, belles lettres in the Arabic literary convention) and *balāgha* (rhetoric). Where chapter 1 uses existing terms to describe what is at work in the creation of the Palestine Project, chapter 2 adds the Arabic grammatical principle of *al-muthannā* (the dual) as a mode of textual relationship to the growing list of ways one text can create meaning through interrelated networks with other works. While intertextuality theory recedes in chapter 3, it remains an important conceptual component throughout this book. Indeed, it is the network of relationships that forge Nasrallah's Palestine Project that creates a "place" for the nation, so that we might answer Edward Said's question, "Is there any place that fits us, together with our accumulated memories and experiences?," with a resounding yes.¹¹

Palestine as Series

Ibrahim Nasrallah had, since the early 1980s, resolved to write Palestine's national novel. The first fruit of this endeavor was a book titled *Birds of Caution* (*Tuyūr al-ḥadhar*), published in 1996 as a standalone work. It tells the story of a young boy who grows up in the Wihdat refugee camp, where Nasrallah himself was raised. The novel was largely autobiographical.¹ It was perhaps because of this that it seemed not to satisfy the author's desire (or the critics') for a sweeping national tome. So, with the material he had collected—reams of interviews with elders, historical reference works, testimonies, and so on—Nasrallah continued to write with the same aim. This time, however, he turned his hand from the chirpy and introspective voice of a child narrator to a more historical mode of writing. Instead of following a young boy born in the aftermath of the Nakba, the protagonist of this second novel is Fouad, a Transjordanian villager who joined the Arab Liberation Army in the 1940s. The time frame of this novel tackled the Nakba (as a failure of the Arab world) and its broader political context head-on. But *Eraser Child* (*Tifl al-mimhāt*), which was finished in late 1999, does not actually feature any Palestinian characters—save for a falafel seller who gives Fouad a free lunch in Jerusalem and later Palestinian corpses when he enters Deir Yasin.² So while it tackled crucial Palestinian events and historical experiences, it somehow did not seem like a great candidate for *the* national novel either.

Sometime after the publication of *Birds of Caution* and before the publication of *Eraser Child*, something coalesced, something that linked these works to Nasrallah's wider drive. When *Eraser Child* was published in 1999, it was issued simultaneously with a rerelease of *Birds of Caution*, and in these new editions both novels bore the same series title emblazoned on the spine: The Palestine Comedies (*al-Malhāt al-filasṭīniyya*). This decision—to bring both works within the same imaginative umbrella (as indeed they stemmed from the same creative drive)—would set the foundation for a new paradigm of imagining the nation. It created a space of telling that could fit all of the locations, trajectories, symbols, and

structures of Palestine in a way no single work could. This first chapter looks at the device of the series as Nasrallah deploys it and, reading this into the larger literary context of the device, proposes that the intertextual linking of works within the series provides a foundational paradigm for the imagination of Palestine as a single entity of many parts. No longer a “nation of fragments” or a nation “waiting for Godot,” all the parts of Palestine in the series are marked as full and complete, just as the novels that told them were.

Broadly, the Palestine Comedies are concentrated on “the story of a people (*sha‘b*),” and as critics have described them, they are a “celebration of the of the spirit that touches the soul of a Palestinian being (*insān*).”³ Each work in the Comedies is set in a recognizable national location (Ramallah, the Galilee, the Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon), each of which is specifically named and described, including references to (variously) specific landscapes with street names, cities, events, and even historical figures.⁴ The Palestine Comedies take place across distinct time-spaces (Ramallah during the Second Intifada, the Jerusalem hills during the Nakba); they have (almost) no repeated characters. No two novels are set in the same geopolitical location, and the order of publication happens without any sense of linear chronology (see table 2). The Balconies, on the other hand, tell the story of the Arab state—that entity under which so many Palestinians have been living since 1948. These works are set in nameless places that could be any Arab country over the past thirty years (or into the next thirty); they tell the stories of structural violence and the control exercised by police, government, media, family systems, surveillance, capitalism, and the genre of the novel. Together, to appropriate Khoury’s description of the intertextual, Nasrallah’s series explore “all of the possibilities” of Palestine, and more importantly leave open the inevitability of change to come.

THE PALESTINE COMEDIES

As a series, the Palestine Comedies eschews expectations of linearity, retrospectivity, and geographic contiguity. Table 2 gives a general overview of the works, when they were published, and when they were added to the series. The series offers, for example, no real “beginning,” no point of origin from which everything stems. Ideas of chronology or development must be quickly abandoned, as an overview of the series shows. Written and added to the series “first,” *Birds of Caution* takes place between 1950 and the early 1970s; the “second,” *Eraser Child*, doubles back to portray events between 1920 and 1948; and the “third,” *Olives of the Streets* (*Zaytūn al-shawāri*), jumps ahead and takes place between the 1970s and 1990s. The temporal skipping continues across the series, so that the Palestine of the Comedies covers (so far) some six hundred years, in no particular order. No reordering would create a cohesive timeline; there is no possible way to read the works that renders time linear. So there can be no clear temporal

TABLE 2 The novels of the Palestine Comedies mentioned in this study, by date added to the series, with a brief summary of the place and time in which the work is set

| <i>al-Malhāt al-filasfīniyya</i> (Palestine Comedies) | First Published (Added to series) | Location, Year, Actors |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Tuyūr al-ḥadhar</i> Birds of Caution | 1996 (2000) | Duheisheh camp (Bethlehem), Wihdat camp (Amman), 1950–1970s |
| <i>Tifl al-mimḥāt</i> Eraser Child | 2000 | Hijaz, Amman, Palestine 1920–48 |
| <i>Zaytūn al-shawāri</i> ‘ Olives of the Streets | 2002 | Unnamed refugee camp near Beirut, 1970s–1990s |
| <i>A ‘rās āmina</i> Amina’s Weddings | 2004 | Gaza Strip, Second Intifada |
| <i>Taḥta shams al-ḍuḥā</i> Under the Midmorning Sun | | West Bank (Ramallah region), Second Intifada |
| <i>Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍā</i> ‘ Time of White Horses | 2007 | Triangle region, Ottoman era to Nakba |
| <i>Qanādīl malik al-jalīl</i> Lanterns of the King of Galilee | 2012 | Lake Tiberias region, Galilee, seventeenth century |
| <i>Mujarrad 2 faqaṭ</i> Just the Two of Us | 1991 (2014) | Unnamed Gulf city, 1980s |
| <i>Arwāḥ Kilimanjārū</i> Souls of Kilimanjaro | 2015 (tbc) | Team of disabled Palestinians scale Mount Kilimanjaro in 2014 |
| <i>Thulāthiya al-ajrās</i> (Bells Trilogy) <i>Zilāl al-mafātīḥ</i> Shadow of the Keys | 2019 | Works are set in Bethlehem/Jerusalem in the 1920s–1940s. They collectively tell the story of Palestine’s first woman photographer and the world she documents. |
| <i>Sirat al-‘ayn</i> Biography of the Eye | | |
| <i>Dabbāba taḥata shajarat ‘id al-milād</i> Tank beneath the Christmas tree | | |

origin. Without this “starting point,” there can be no “development,” in a linear sense, between the works; there is no trajectory, no stated goal. In fact, the series is open, with no end in sight. The fact that the work is open-ended prevents the production of what Etienne Balibar calls the nation’s “retrospective illusion,” or the generation of a tautological historical narrative that links the nation present to the past.⁵ Just as no linear order can be established through the temporal settings of the works, no linear order can really be created (thematic, symbolic, etc) out of the “order” in which the works were written.

To even define which novel of the Comedies was written first requires a complicated answer. *Birds of Caution* and *Eraser Child*, as we saw, confound the identification of an easy starting point, as the Comedies only came into existence

when both works were placed in it (or declared to constitute it). Further complicating the idea of an origin for the series is the retroactive addition of *Just the Two of Us* (*Mujarrad 2 faqat*), published first as an independent work in 1992 and added to the series in 2014 in its third edition.⁶ Did the series begin before it was invented, in 1992? Or did it begin even before *Just the Two of Us* was published, perhaps with the very desire to write the Palestinian epic? What if later retrospective additions were first published before Nasrallah had even hatched his epic plan? The nation is thus formed and reshaped with the addition of each “text” regardless of when or where that text “originated.” A collection of works with no identifiable beginning and no end in sight (Nasrallah constantly hints that the series will continue indefinitely)⁷, the novels represent events, themes, and symbols as they are imagined in a particular place, at a particular time. Like Palestine, there is no “end” to the Comedies. The series’ operating principle might be best stated in the words of one protagonist in Nasrallah’s *Under the Midmorning Sun* (*Taht shams al-duḥā*) when he is asked to tell his own life story from start to finish: “I don’t see an ending at all, I see only a chain of beginnings. The ending is many beginnings: so where to start?”⁸

There is no point of retrospective because works are added to the Comedies every few years. They are not even all issued by the same publishing house. Nasrallah insists that the 2015 *Souls of Kilimanjaro* (*Arwāḥ kilimanjārū*), published by HBKU Press (formerly Bloomsbury Qatar Publishing) and not al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya li l-‘Ulūm nāshirūn, which has published the others, is part of the series. The novel is a fictional account of a hike up Kilimanjaro that Nasrallah participated in; the walk brought together a community of disabled Palestinian teenagers from across the locations of Palestine. While its inclusion remains “unofficial” for reasons of publisher politics, this unofficiality simply speaks to so many other elements of Palestine: unrecognized legally but included nonetheless. There is, moreover, a series within the series. In 2019 Nasrallah added, all at once, three novels about the development of photography (loosely) in Bethlehem in the early 1900s. The series is known as the Trilogy of the Bells (*Thulāthiyat al-ajrās*) but is firmly part of the Palestine Comedies.⁹

Similarly, the Comedies make no claim to a Palestinian place, at least not in the geopolitical sense of a sovereign territory. When trying to define the “space” of Palestine through the Palestine Comedies, one must quickly abandon the notion of a bordered sovereign territory. Instead of combining the many locations covered by the novels into a contiguous territory, the Comedies claim dozens of locations across myriad political boundaries. Beginning with the Palestinian refugee camps of Jordan and Lebanon, the Arab Liberation Army barracks, Gaza City during the Second Intifada, and so on, the geographic scope of Palestine is not limited to any one territory administered by any one authority at any one time. The series includes the story of Daher al-Umar and his pseudo-state in seventeenth-century Tiberias, parts of the southern Jordanian desert when it was under British con-

trol, and an unnamed Gulf country where two Palestinian refugees arrive from Lebanon. Even well-known places are recast. Ramallah, today the de facto capital, is treated in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords and presented at once as the place where one protagonist has lived all of his life and the site of another's "return" to the homeland: the same space represents two different experiences of Palestine. Each of the places that the novels portray become texts—locations—of Palestine. With the addition of *Souls of Kilimanjaro*, the settings of the series cover some 6,500 kilometers. And that, again, is only so far. Just to list the spaces is unwieldy, but to imagine them as a single cohesive unit is even more of a challenge. How do all of these "spaces" fit together? The series provides an answer. The final section of this chapter, once the full scope of the two series is laid out, returns to the story of Salwa, whose lesson about the value and possibilities of the series as a vessel go far beyond the moment of her first discovery.

Underscoring the diversity of the texts of the Palestine conjured in the Comedies are the many different narrative styles that each novel employs. As if to further stymie the reader's attempt to find an easy cohesion between the novels, the works of the Comedies range from historical fiction to stream of consciousness, "realist" to absurd. *Birds of Caution* begins its story from the narrative perspective of an unborn fetus, while *Just the Two of Us* is told by either a set of twins/doubles or a character with multiple personalities (we never do find out). *Time of White Horses* (*Zaman al-khuyūl al-baydā'*) masquerades as historical fiction, but its footnotes are fabricated, and it takes place in an imaginary village (the only one of the Comedies to do so). *Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (*Qanādīl malik al-jalīl*) assumes a more standard historical tone, but the grandmother in *Time of White Horses* appears mysteriously in one of the work's asides, forcing the reader to again question the authority of the "historical" voice.¹⁰ The would-be hero of *Eraser Child* is constantly undermined by a sarcastic and all-knowing narrator, and the authoritative journalist who tries to tell the story of Salwa in *Olives of the Streets* is told repeatedly that he has not properly listened to her story.

However different the texts may be, they are unmistakably connected. Even on the surface, the works are connected by what Genette would call their "paratextual" elements. The matching cover art, production style, and series title displayed prominently on the cover and spine all link the works visually, as do lists of the "rest" of the novels in the series (which itself keeps expanding as new works come out and new editions of existing novels are released).¹¹ These changing paratexts offer, to quote Genette, "an invitation, in advance, to read it [the books] twice: the first time, right now, as a 'whole,' and the second time, later, as 'part of a group.'"¹² Paratextual elements (to say nothing yet of the thematic overlaps) create a "relationship of correspondence"; in other words, the novels become intertextually linked.

There are also themes and symbols developed across the Comedies (as well as the Balconies) that knit the works together. One that chapter 4 examines is

the anemone, the ubiquitous red flower that carpets Palestine's hills in the spring. Popping up across the works, the flower is developed as a symbol of violence and hope yet to come, signaling the oppression not only of the British but also the "honor" system's violence against women. It is also an expression of multiplicity-in-difference, as a symbol of hope/violence and in the shape of its cleft leaves and many petals. As chapter 4 explores, the symbol plays on the word's Arabic origins (*shaqā'iq nu'mān*) and the way its roots are deployed across the novels of both series. But more on that later.

Most important here, is that it is these shared elements—themes like the anemone, the subject of Palestine, and of course the series title—that make the reader of one text in the series aware of the others, so that none is ever totally independent. The result, imaginatively speaking, in Genette's terms, is "the actual presence of one text within another."¹³ Just as when a character asks "To be or not to be?" and Hamlet enters the mind of a reader, upon opening one volume of the Comedies, all the other possible volumes appear in the imagination. And so it is with Palestine: a nation conjured in the mind across countless kilometers, countless other states, and time/spaces that span centuries. Just as Palestine does not take shape in a vacuum, however, neither do the texts of the Palestine Comedies.

THE BALCONIES SERIES

By the time Nasrallah was waist-deep in the Palestine Comedies, he launched a parallel series of works that focus on the insidious violence of state structures. While distinct, the two series nonetheless share a tantalizing singular imaginative grammar. Read together, they furnish the reader with a sense of the problems of time and the violence done by imposed state orders on individuals, particularly Palestinians. Reading both as a larger unit of writing—as a collective Palestine Project—it is clear that the works of the second series emerged out of the questions raised by the first. What the new series did that the explicitly national novels could not was take a view on the state and its forms that the story of the nation missed—or had to exist outside of. Indicating this position—at once inside and outside the state—is the title of each work and indeed the series, known collectively as the Balconies.

With the majority of Palestinians in the Middle East (and indeed beyond) living subject to the state structures of other nations, it became clear in the Comedies that the story of Palestine could not really be complete if confined to the nation and without taking account of the role and rules of the state. The subjects of the works (so far) are state, government, news media, religion, patriarchy, the novel, surveillance, and security. Each of the Balconies can be read as an independent examination of usually invisible but always insidious state structures, of ordering forces that operate over those within the state's sovereign grasp. The series has

a structure and logic of its own that reveals how state power permeates all avenues of life. The first four of the Balconies are particularly marked as a collective due to their shared title structure *Shurfat al-_____ (Balcony of the)*. Prefacing all of the works with “Balcony of” was later discarded for a paratextual series title on the cover and spine of the works marking them as *al-Shurafāt (The Balconies)*. It seems that once the unique frame of the balcony was established, later works dispensed with the title formality.¹⁴ With the first of the Balconies published in 2005, it also seems clear that questions raised (and answers found) through this series forged the Comedies into the shape they are found in today.

It seemed, for a time, that a series on the state would begin, more or less, where the story of the nation left off. We can see in table 3 a five-year hiatus in publications in the Comedies, as focus shifts to the Balconies. During this time, critics, and Nasrallah himself, celebrated the end of the series with his *pièce de résistance*, which saw him nominated for his first Arabic Booker award the following year. *Time of White Horses* seemed—and was presented as—the national epic to end an epic series.¹⁵ The novel is the story of the Nakba and masterfully integrates oral history, folklore, fictional footnote, and heroic figures into one tale. The elements of the work equally embody and trouble the ideal of the national hero (so prevalent in Palestinian cultural and political discourse) and indeed stories of the Nakba as an “origin” for the national story. But after three works of the Balconies, Nasrallah surprised his readers with another (and then another and another) work of the Comedies series. After this, a work was added to each series every other year. They were fully intertwined.

The first of the Balconies, *Balcony of Delirium (Shurfat al-hadhayān, 2004)*, for example, examines the state, the media, and the linkage of 9/11 to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.¹⁶ In a totally experimental stream-of-consciousness-style story that weaves images of dead Iraqis and Hollywood film, the novel centers on a government information officer whose faith in the system of truth and representation falters until it is destroyed. The next, *Balcony of the Snow Man (Shurfat rajul al-thalj, 2006)*, follows a government news writer and explores how narrative structures engineered by the state have parallels in the ways of telling employed by the novel; they are structures that literally kill.¹⁷ The third book of the Balconies plumbs the power of the state even further. *Balcony of Disgrace (Shurfat al-‘ār, 2010)* was penned amid the 2008–9 Gaza onslaught and published the following year.¹⁸ It takes place in an unnamed city (modeled on Amman) and follows Manar, its protagonist and heroine, who begins life as the hope of her family. She dies, however, after having been abducted by a man seeking vengeance on her brother, raped, refused an abortion, imprisoned by the state, abused by her guards, and raped by a fellow inmate; and she is finally shot dead by her brother as “the windows and balconies filled with hundreds of shadows looking out over the street” (233). As the story of the young woman’s tragedy unfolds “the war on Gaza continues”

(151), a war that is paralleled with her murder through a linked investigation of the structures of power that, though they claim they are protecting the vulnerable, quite often only chew them up.

Not only do the novels of the *Balconies* explore the nature of power structures, but they also show how these structures participate in (and even to a large degree dictate the possibilities of) narrative. The focus on invisible structures is reflected in the form of the works, which are on the whole much more “experimental” than the *Comedies*, as chapters 4 and 5 explore. The two series are really part of one imaginative literary project, which I call the Palestine Project. Giving narrative shape to the pernicious, invisible, and horrendously violent structures of the state, and tracing how these structures are repeated across the operation of family, police, and religious institutions, seems to have liberated the story of Palestine from the necessity of an ending. A look at the publication history of the combined works (table 3) shows how intimately linked they are and how the ideas produced in one quite literally lead into another.

The Palestine that emerges here is almost precisely the reverse of what Benedict Anderson described in his *Imagined Communities*. The modern nation, Anderson wrote, was conjured in the mind as a “sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time.”¹⁹ The vision of the nation that Anderson so famously drew imagined this sociological organism as “solid,” so that it was within a certain boundary that individuals could understand their co-nationals as inhabiting the same (to use Anderson’s term) “meanwhile” and moving through history as a unit. The container for Palestine here becomes the series.

Where the *Comedies* disarticulates the assumptions of linear time and bordered space, the *Balconies* allows us to see the structures of power. A nation, after all, is not really only composed of time and place, but the concepts that create relationships between them. Anderson called these the “discrete historical forces” that pressed distinct visions of time and space into the shape of the nation-state. What the *Balconies* brings to Nasrallah’s Palestine is the story of the not-so-discrete forces acting on Palestinian times, spaces, and people; the forces that pressed Palestinians into particular patterns of being. In identifying some of the structures at work, a difference can be seen between Palestinian lives and aspirations and the limits that are imposed on them.

SERIES IN CONTEXT

As a way of writing about complex interrelationships across space and time for a national community, the series seems ripe for an exploration of Palestine. Indeed, Nasrallah is not the only author who has used the device to tell such a complex story. Elias Khoury—the Lebanese author of Palestine’s first declared national novel (an irony that has not gone unremarked)—has played with the series on a number of occasions. His famous *Gate of the Sun* (*Bāb al-shams*, 1998), he writes,

TABLE 3 The novels of Ibrahim Nasrallah's Palestine Project addressed in the present study, presented in the order they were added to their respective series (the novels shaded in gray are those analyzed in-depth)

| <i>al-Malhāt al-filasfīniyya</i> (Palestine Comedies) | First Published (Added to series) | <i>Shurfāt</i> (Balconies) |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Ṭuyūr al-ḥadhar</i> Birds of Caution | 1996 (2000) | |
| <i>Tifl al-mimḥāt</i> Eraser Child | 2000 | |
| <i>Zaytūn al-shawāri</i> Olives of the Streets | 2002 | |
| <i>A 'rās Āmina</i> Amina's Weddings | 2004 | |
| <i>Tahta shams al-duḥā</i> Under the Midmorning Sun | | |
| | 2005 | <i>Shurfat al-hadhayān</i> Balcony of Delirium |
| | 2007 | |
| <i>Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍā</i> Time of White Horses | 2009 | <i>Shurfat rajul al-thalj</i> Balcony of the Snow Man |
| | 2010 | <i>Shurfat al-'ār</i> Balcony of Disgrace |
| <i>Qanādīl malik al-jalīl</i> Lanterns of the King of Galilee | 2012 | |
| | 2013 | <i>Shurfat al-hāwiya</i> Balcony of the Abyss |
| <i>Mujarrad 2 faqaṭ</i> Just the Two of Us | 1991 (2014) | |
| | 2014 | <i>Shurfat al-firdaus</i> Balcony of Paradise |
| <i>Arwāḥ Kilimanjārū</i> Souls of Kilimanjaro | 2015 (tbc) | |
| | 2016 | <i>Harb al-kalb al-thāniya</i> (Dog War II) |
| <u>Thulāthiyat al-ajrās (Bells Trilogy)</u> <i>Zilāl al-mafātīḥ</i> Shadow of the Keys | | |
| <i>Sīrat al-'ayn</i> Biography of the Eye | 2019 | |
| <i>Dabbāba taḥata shajarat 'id al-milād</i> Tank beneath the Christmas tree | | |

“was initially two volumes, but I put it into one book . . . [because] Younis [a protagonist] was dying from the beginning,” a fact that he felt knit together the different stories. *Gate of the Sun* was an epic told over two sections that Khoury ultimately bound together. It was an epic, however, that Khoury would come to revise in what he calls a three-part sequel titled *Children of the Ghetto (Awlād al-ghītū)*,²⁰ whose protagonist, Adam, claims to have known the characters in *Gate of the Sun* and criticizes them for—among other things—abandoning their politics. The new trilogy thus revises and extends *Gate of the Sun* and is itself told over multiple volumes. Khoury explains, “I want to explore all of the possibilities of [Adam’s] life,”²¹ a quest that required an expanded and expansive way of telling. Writing a story over three volumes was “not my choice,” he insists; “I would not have chosen to write like that. I’m not Naguib Mahfouz and I don’t like the style of Mahfouz in the trilogy.” Yet, he adds, the story of Palestine “couldn’t be done in one volume.”²²

Mahfouz, likely the most well-known and widely read Arab novelist, is famous for his national novel, which is also a trilogy. His Cairo Trilogy²³ is hailed as the “canonical national allegory” of Arabic literature.²⁴ Critics seem to have passed over the implications of a national narrative being drawn out across three distinct texts. The Trilogy’s tracing of Egyptian politics across three generations of the Abdel Jawad family through the critical years of state formation from 1914 to 1944 has been called a work of “vast historical scope” and complicated national political allegory.²⁵ At the same time, its telling of politics through the different vantages found in each volume eschews the teleological, complicating the construction of an easy coming-of-age narrative for the nation. The Trilogy lays out a story of complicated negotiation on which a nation is balanced (or, perhaps, unsettled). If the prototype of nationhood in the Arab world has a complicated relationship with the form of the state when it comes to fiction (and, indeed, politics), it seems hardly surprising that Palestine-in-fiction would need a unique shape too.

Beyond Palestine, Peter Hitchcock in *The Long Space* identified in the series “a crucial chronotope of decolonization.”²⁶ Not only, he elaborated, do series allow for a full exploration of different elements or locations of a transnational or multilingual experience, but “these extended narratives extenuate time’s purchase on their comprehension,”²⁷ so that not only was narrative practice imagined anew, but reading and understanding were transformed—both could happen over what he termed “the long space.” Hitchcock saw, for example, in Assia Djebar’s Algerian Quartet and Pramoedyya Toer’s Buru Quartet a trend in which postcolonial nations could be imagined in all their complexity. The series, he found, gave authors the “long space” necessary to communicate the importance of duration and crossings that a single novel seemed to limit. Djebar’s Quartet provides an interesting case in point. It is a national project in the sense that the works are meant “to reestablish links with the maternal world from which [the author] felt distant” after leaving Algeria for France with her family.²⁸ In a sense, the series imagines Algeria together with its exiles as a single imaginative space. The final volume of

the quartet was never written,²⁹ and thus the final image of the nation is left open for continued interpretation.

The series can also write political formations beyond the nation. Radwa Ashour's Granada Trilogy conjures a Pan-Arab world in a story that sought to reckon with its collapse and "cope with defeat."³⁰ Her work fits well with Hitchcock's assessment that the series works as a tool for telling the nation where the nation form doesn't quite work. The device, he writes, is "bound to the concrete predicaments of postcolonial narration as transnational critique."³¹ But it also goes further. The series can imagine nations with a complex relationship to the state, as a way of grappling with competing problematic structures. This is certainly its use in Nasrallah's works. Once his effort to write *the* national novel had taken shape as a series, the idea of Palestine was suddenly released from the confines of the nation as a bounded and linear idea.

SERIES AS CONTAINER

The idea of Palestine as a series is reinforced by the themes and characters of the novels that make up the Palestine Project. We saw this in *Salwa*, whose discovery of the possibility for expression in the series served as an introduction to the literary device. It is worth, now that the basics are set out, returning to the scene where *Salwa* discovers *Don Quixote*, Dante, and the *Hilāl* works to see how expansive the notion of the series is and to read more closely into her life and context. As the introduction established, *Salwa*'s story was impossible to tell in the context of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon in the 1970s. Her community simply did not have the means to hear it. This impossibility is examined in more literal terms through the character of Abd al-Rahman, a Lebanese journalist who learns about *Salwa* in a short newspaper article about PLO corruption.

Abd al-Rahman becomes determined to find *Salwa* and tell her story. Of course, he does not want to tell her story exactly but the story of her sexual assault at the hands of a leadership meant to protect her. Her story is, for him, a story of PLO corruption. The central tension of *Olives of the Streets* is *Salwa*'s struggle to have the journalist actually tell *her* story, since she has already given up on being able to tell it herself. Just like her community could not hear her, so were Abd al-Rahman's ears blocked—but not by the same existential narrative. For the journalist it was genre and the way he planned on telling *Salwa*'s story that got in the way. In the news story about PLO corruption *Salwa* was just one of a list of sins, and in a biography—which the journalist spends the length of the novel trying to write—he wants to tell how *Salwa* was turned into an assault victim. In both, her life as she knows it is erased. On reading a draft, *Salwa* is compelled to throw the pages out the window, telling the journalist, "If I hadn't cast out these papers I would have died under them" (7). Neither of these forms can hold her story. The idea of the series offered an expansive alternative.

It was no coincidence, however, that Sawla picked up *Purgatory*, the middle work of Dante's *Divine Comedies*. Within the wider rhetoric of the Palestinian struggle, Palestinian refugees living in the camps are understood to be living in a sort of middle space of waiting.³² As Salwa remarks in the novel, the keys that many of the refugees held on to, and the Haifa Steel Workers card that her uncle keeps in his pocket (102), are meaningless except as markers of the past to which there is a hope of return. There is "nothing real" to existence in the camps, Salwa lamented, "except us, waiting for ourselves" (13), unless the purgatory of the camps can be considered a place, a time of Palestine; unless the camps might be understood as connected to the story of Palestine and not an interminable aside. So as Salwa comes across *The Divine Comedy* and remarks, "I didn't understand the title, but put my hand out toward *Inferno*, [then] *Purgatory*, I liked it best of the books, and I opened it," she reads into the pages of *Olives of the Streets*, and the already established Palestine Comedies series, a key moment of connection. When she flips through the pages, she chooses a passage that marked the first instance of imagining a link between the Christian heaven, hell, and purgatory as physically connected spheres.

Let me provide some context (which is in fact another hallmark of intertextuality, since no work can be brought into another without bringing its own times and spaces with it). When it was produced in fourteenth-century Italy, Dante's trilogy (referred to in the novels as *al-Kūmīdiya*) caused a bit of a stir. It was the first Christian imagination of scientific and theological connection between the celestial realms.³³ Before Dante, heaven, hell, and purgatory had only been ideologically linked; there had been no depiction or figuration of what a relationship might have looked like or how it could be talked about. In tracing the character Dante's journey from the levels of hell and the stages of purgatory and on into heaven, Dante-the-author forged an imaginative—and geographic—path between the spaces. Indeed, in order to narrate movement between, say, the abysmal valley of pain and the Mountain of Purgatory, Dante and his readers had to imagine these geographies into being. By invoking Dante, Nasrallah (by way of Salwa) is telling his readers that here, too, a geography is being imagined.

It is no coincidence, then, that the passage of *Purgatory* that Salwa reads out "loud" into her novel, is one where Dante is stitching together realms of the divine:

"As is he who suddenly sees a thing before him whereat he marvels, and doth and doth not believe, saying, 'It is, it is not.'"

Then I turned to its next pages:

"And lo! a sudden lustre ran from all quarters through the great forest, so that it put me in suspect of lightning." (63)³⁴

The unmarked lines come from Cantos VII and XXIX. The first is verse 12 of Canto VII, where Dante has just entered purgatory. The words in the quote are spoken

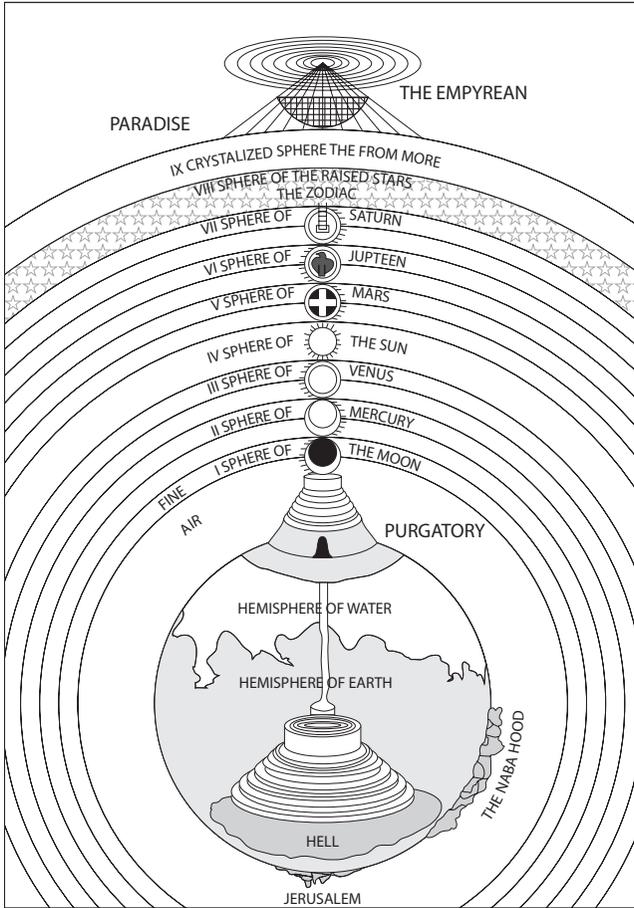


FIGURE 1. A visual representation of Dante’s celestial realms, rendered in the 1400s by an unknown cartographer based on an interpretation of the narrative trajectory that Dante and Virgil/Beatrice take through Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory.

at the precise point of confluence between hell and purgatory, by Dante’s new guide who thinks it miraculous—or in his words, he “doth and doth not believe”—that his guide from hell can pass through into the second world.³⁵ Not only can Dante move between spheres, but so can his guide, who is witness to the narrative passage. This means that the “stuff” of one realm can also exist in another. That Virgil did not turn to dust or vanish was proof that the worlds were one world. By invoking this passage in the pages of a novel of the Palestine Comedies, Nasrallah tells the reader that new imaginations are possible and that they are demonstrable through narrative.

The second passage Salwa reads out loud seems less straightforward. It comes from Canto XXIX, tens of pages later. Reading, “lo! A sudden lustre,” brings the story of Dante to the peak of the Mountain of Purgatory and is the start of a scene in which the journeyers observe an allegorical play. According to critics, the play is performed for Dante-the-character to help him (and Dante-the-author’s reader) understand purgatory at a deeper level.³⁶ In the source text, the “sudden lustre” (in the Arabic, *nūran surra*) that appears as if lightning is in fact a light that literally illuminates a sort of play-within-a-play.³⁷ We thus come to a play within a text (*Purgatory*) that is an allegory within a series (*al-Kūmīdiya*). Readings of the allegorical play have suggested that the instance is a moment of clarity not simply in *Purgatory*, but in the *Divine Comedy*, that illuminates a particular vision of the cosmos and the nature of god.³⁸ Nasrallah, then, draws on a teaching moment to indicate that he is offering one of his own.

According to its critics, the play in Dante’s Canto XXIX is a dense representation of the lessons and themes of the Scriptures, presented in purgatory in the final stage before reaching heaven. This is a reaffirmation of sorts of the veracity of the scriptures; transmitted stories of the heavens written down by people on earth. That what is said to be the word of god is affirmed in the celestial realm reiterates the relationship between belief in god and the afterlife.³⁹ This links not only the three celestial spheres, but the world of “man”—and it demonstrates the sustained connection. The earth and the heavens, even beyond the celestial realms, are brought into a single geography. This moment of illumination, the precise exclamation of “a sudden lustre [that] ran through all quarters of the great forest,” urges readers to read the story of *Olives of the Streets* not only into the works of the Palestine Comedies but also into the world they inhabit as they are reading. The allegorical play works simultaneously as a metaphor for how intertexts (from a play-within-a-play to the device of the series) forge a wider spatial consciousness and can create links between the world and how one understands the way one navigates one’s way through it.

Through *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*, the nature of the relationships, and indeed the ways and means of movement between heaven, hell, and purgatory, became figurable. Where once these spaces were understood as separate, or even not conceived spatially at all, Dante’s imagination saw figures moving between the layers of the afterlife, connecting them in ways that would change the hereafter into a single contiguous and multilayered space. The intimation is that the same can be done for Salwa and Palestine: both nation and character are in different ways singular bodies whose telling requires the service of multiple texts. While Dante’s *Divine Comedy* aims to illuminate the path to salvation, the Palestine Comedies uses text and intertext to create new relationships between stories, their times, and their spaces. While characters from Dante’s texts moved between worlds, the larger passage within which the cantos of *Purgatory* are quoted reminds the reader that there are many ways of linking texts beyond the repetition of character.

In fact, when Salwa looks at her teacher's bookshelves, it is not just works with repeating characters like *Don Quixote* or the *Divine Comedy* that she registers. To more fully quote the passage:

There were more books than in the school library, more books than I had seen in my life, numbered series of books: the novels of the Hilāl publishers, Hilāl's critical editions, world literature, international plays . . . and between them the most surprising, *Don Quixote*, which I had never imagined was in two volumes! [Then] there were two I did not understand, and I put my hands out toward them: *Hell, Purgatory* . . . (63)

There are referenced here several types of series, the creation of which—and engagement with which—communicates a different sort of relationship between texts and between reader and text. *Al-Hilāl*, for example, is an Egyptian literary magazine founded by Jurji Zaydan. The series would have been recognizable by what Genette called “the series emblem.”⁴⁰ The series was something of the equivalent of the Penguin “classics,” where works in orange or silver jackets are recognized as important whether or not the title is known to a prospective reader. The works of the Hilāl series, in the words of Genette, “fit a certain ‘profile,’”⁴¹ in this case of desired or deemed useful knowledge. In Arabic literary history, these works defined what it meant to be “well read” in the “modern” era. This series-by-emblem connects the texts by their profile—a profile that a publisher decides and gatekeeps. What is or is not canonical, or worth reading in a particular genre, is signaled. A series, then, can collectively communicate the importance of the works within it—importance that also seems to transcend place and time.

This is certainly what Nasrallah's Palestine Comedies achieve. Not only do two series emblems create a Palestine that transcends space and time, but they together create a conceptual container for this novel nation. In reading the texts of the two series, this imaginative space becomes quickly populated with new ideals and vocabularies to explain and narrate this particular vision of Palestine.